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UNCLAS ABIDJAN 000223

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TEACHERS' STRIKE IN COTE D'IVOIRE REFLECTS FRAYING SOCIAL  
STRUCTURE

1 (U) SUMMARY: On March 16, 2009, secondary school teachers called off a nationwide strike that had closed schools on and off since January 2009. The teachers' demands for better pay and working conditions began in November 2008 with several mini-protests, including the withholding of students' grades. After several failed attempts by the Ministry of Education to get the teachers back to work, President Gbagbo intervened and met with the teachers' unions on March 13. Gbagbo promised to address the teachers' demands following the IFI's approval of budget support to the GOCI, anticipated by the end of March. On this promise, the teachers returned to work. Meanwhile, parents and students have expressed concern and skepticism about what they call "temporary solutions" to strikes and other disruptions in the education system. End Summary.

#### BACKGROUND

12. (U) Late last year, four teachers' unions in Cote d'Ivoire called for all secondary school teachers to stop teaching until the GOCI honored commitments it made in a Memorandum of Understanding that was signed over a year ago, to change the status and salary structures of secondary school teachers. For one week in January 2009 the teachers stopped teaching to bring government's attention to their demands. However, according to officials of the lead teacher's union, Syndicat National des Enseignants du Second Degre de Cote d'Ivoire (SYNESCI), the government ignored them completely. Because of GOCI inaction, SYNESCI leaders announced a full strike to begin on March 2.

13. (U) On March 1, the Minister of National Education, Gilbert Bleu-Laine, went on television to talk to the teachers, asking for patience while he sought additional funding. However, the next day, the leader of SYNESCI, Mr. Paul Gnelou, responded in the papers that the Minister's statement was not convincing. He announced that the strike would go on as scheduled and last until the GOCI met their demands. These demands included better salaries and working conditions; assurance that all salaries for teachers on strike and those withholding grades would be reinstated; and assurance that the GOCI would not take any retaliatory measures against striking teachers. (Note: About two hundred striking teachers were arrested and detained on March 10. End note.)

#### THE PRESIDENT'S PROMISE

14. (U) During his March 13 meeting with leaders of the teachers' unions, President Gbagbo promised that when the IMF/World Bank approved budget support for GOCI, the teachers' demands would be addressed. Subsequently, the detained teachers were released. The IMF/World Bank's approval of significant budget support (\$150 million) for the GOCI came through as expected at the end of March and should enable the GOCI to inject needed funds into health, education and rural development. In fact, in its new program with the IMF, the GOCI has agreed to increase spending to address poverty and other social issues, including expenditures on health and education, from 6.9 percent of GDP in 2008 to 7.7 percent of GDP (an increase of approximately USD 160 million) in 2009. But, it is unlikely, without reforms, that a short-term cash infusion will provide a lasting solution to recurring teacher strikes.

15. (U) There is widespread concern among parents about the teacher strikes and the resulting degradation in education. Cote d'Ivoire once boasted one of the best school systems in West Africa, and some parents are concerned that they may need to send their children

outside of the country for quality schooling. But given the high cost, it is not a choice that most people can make.

#### STRIKES AND OTHER DISRUPTIONS

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¶6. (U) In recent months, workers in several sectors of the Ivorian economy have gone on strike. A recent strike by medical doctors, which left the majority of the population with very little medical care for over two weeks, just ended. Education is constantly interrupted by striking teachers, as well as striking students. Strikes by the latter often include acts of violence by the Federation Etudiante et Scolaire de Cote d'Ivoire (FESCI) -- the Student Union of Cote d'Ivoire. Since January 5, some schools in Abidjan and Daloa have been closed due to incidents related to dissension among FESCI members and FESCI's refusal to allow other student groups to operate within the schools.

¶7. (U) In June of last year, teachers in 145 private secondary schools voted to strike to claim nine months' back pay. (Note: The government is responsible for partial payment of teachers for students it allocates to the private schools. End note.) Separately, volunteer teachers in areas under the Forces Nouvelles (the former rebels) went on strike in September 2008 to draw attention to their demands to be officially absorbed as part of the Ministry of Education. In November 2008 secondary school teachers withheld students' grades to further protest the GOCI's inaction regarding their demands for better pay and working conditions.

Comment

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¶8. (U) Although the current strike has ended, many believe that it is unlikely there will be a more permanent solution to the incessant strikes in the education sector any time soon. This is a challenge to normalizing life in Cote d'Ivoire as a result of the political crisis, particularly in the northern part of the country where many schools were closed from 2002 to the end of 2007. Not only are strikes an issue, but there is also a paucity of classroom space and teaching materials, especially in the rural areas. The underlying problem is the simple fact that government has taken virtually no action to keep the school system viable since the crisis hit in 2002, while the school-age population has ballooned and the education system infrastructure has deteriorated. Gbagbo's intervention to resolve the strike is a recurring pattern used by the government to restore calm and does not necessarily attest to his popularity, but rather to the respect that Ivoirians still give to the Presidency. Sooner or later, however, his promises must be kept. End Comment.

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